

# Flow Plan for River Less Clear

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After the Army Corps of Engineers previously endorsed changes in Missouri River flows aimed at saving endangered wildlife, the waters are suddenly murkier.

The corps announced Thursday that it will soon present a range of alternatives for future management of the river, including some that would not include raising water levels in the spring and reducing flows in summer.

Federal and state wildlife agencies have pushed for those changes - designed to mimic the muddy river's natural flow before it was altered by man - as necessary to create nesting grounds for two endangered birds, the least tern and piping plover, and to provide a spawning cue for the endangered pallid sturgeon and other native fish.

The flow changes have been fought by barge interests who could see an interruption of the river's navigation season and by farmers who could see spring flooding in lowland fields along the river.

Corps officials said their announcement had nothing to do with political pressure or the change of administration in Washington. They said it was important to present more than one alternative and receive comments from the public on them all.

But the corps was accused by conservation groups of bowing to the barge industry and its allies in Congress and the Bush administration.

"The barge industry, the agricultural lobby and their political allies have ordered, 'About face,' and the Army Corps has snapped to and saluted," said Chad Smith, a Lincoln-based representative of the environmental group American Rivers.

Smith said the announcement also increases the chance that environmental groups will opt to go to court in an effort to get the federal Endangered Species Act enforced to protect the threatened birds and fish.

"That seems to be what the corps and administration want us to do," he said.

Thursday's development is the latest in a decadelong debate as the Corps of Engineers has worked to put together a new "master manual" for its operation of dams on the nation's longest river.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service told the corps in November that the new plan would have to include increased releases in the spring from Gavins Point Dam on the Nebraska-South Dakota border and reduced flows in summer if the threatened species are to be saved.

In what was hailed at the time by environmental groups as a major breakthrough, corps officials appeared to agree in principle. The question, said Brig. Gen. Carl Strock, head of the corps' northwestern division, was not whether there would be a spring rise, but how much,

when and where.

"We've agreed on the destination we're headed for," Strock said in November.

The corps publicly endorsed the changes as recently as two weeks ago.

Paul Johnston, a corps spokesman in Omaha, said the flow changes have not gone away and remain alternatives in the draft plan that will be issued later this month.

"There are going to be tradeoffs," he said. "We thought it was important people get to see all the tradeoffs as this decision process moves along."

Johnston said that after the corps spends six months receiving public comment on the alternatives in the draft, it will in the end endorse a single flow plan sometime next year. Any flow changes could still be implemented by spring 2003, as originally planned.

Diane Katzenberger, spokeswoman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Denver, said it would be unusual for the corps to put out a draft plan without a preferred alternative.

"I'm not sure it's a step back, but I don't see it as a step forward," she said. "In the end, they are going to have to choose an alternative that does not pose jeopardy to the endangered species. We have determined the status quo does."